

# Language

*If concepts are not clear, words do not fit. If words do not fit, the day's work cannot be accomplished, morals and art do not flourish. If morals and art do not flourish, punishments are not just. If punishments are not just, the people do not know where to put hand or foot.* —CONFUCIUS, ANALECTS, XIII: 3

*When an idea is wanting, a word can always be found to take its place.* —GOETHE

*He who defines the terms wins the argument.* —CHINESE PROVERB

*Beware of and eschew pompous prolixity.* —CHARLES A. BEARDSLEY

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Language is the primary tool used in formulating arguments. We all are familiar (or should be!) with the power of language when it is employed by fine writers of fiction—Shakespeare, Fielding, Austen, Joyce (to name just a few who wrote in the English language)—the list is very long. The principal point of literature classes is precisely to make this apparent. But good writing can be equally effective when used in the construction of argumentative essays and other argumentative passages. (We will consider in Chapter 13 the possibility that literature can present its own sort of argument.) The trouble is that language can be used effectively in the service of fallacious as well as cogent arguments, deceiving the unwary or unknowing into accepting arguments they should reject.

## 1. Cognitive and Emotive Meanings

If the purpose of a sentence is to inform or to state a fact, some of its words must refer to things, events, or properties of one kind or another. These words must thus have what is commonly called **cognitive meaning**. (The sentences they compose also are said to have cognitive meaning.)

But most words also have **emotive meaning**, which means that they have positive or negative overtones. The emotive charges of some words are obvious. Think of the terms *wop*, *kike*, *nigger*, and *fag*, or the so-called four-letter words that rarely appear in textbooks, even in this permissive age.



TOLES 1989 The Buffalo News/Universal Press Syndicate.

*An important art of politicians is to find new names for institutions which under old names have become odious to the public.*

—Talleyrand



The words just mentioned have negative emotive charges. But lots of words have positive overtones. Examples are *freedom*, *love*, *democracy*, *springtime*, and *peace*. And plenty of others have either neutral or mixed emotive force. *Pencil*, *run*, and *river* tend to be neutral words. *Socialism*, *politician*, and *whiskey* get mixed reviews.

In fact, almost any word that is emotively positive for some people or in some contexts may be just the opposite for others. One person's meat often is indeed another's poison. Perhaps the paradigm case is the word *God*, which has one kind of overtone for true believers, another for agnostics, and still another for strident atheists. To the average person, the word *student* has positive connotations, but not to a landlord or landlady.

Terms that on first glance may appear to be emotively neutral often turn out to have at least modest emotive overtones. The terms *bureaucrat*, *government official*, and *public servant*, for instance, all refer to the same group of people and thus have approximately the same cognitive import, but their emotive meanings are quite different. Of the three, only *government official* comes close to being neutral in tone.

## 2. Emotive Meanings and Persuasive Uses of Language

The fact that expressions have emotive as well as cognitive meanings has not escaped the notice of con artists, advertisers, politicians, and others whose stock in trade is the manipulation of attitudes, desires, and beliefs. Over the years, they have learned how to use the emotive side of language to further their own ends.

One common way in which the emotive force of language can be used to con, as Talleyrand observed some time ago, is to mask the odious nature of an institution or practice by giving it a nice name rather than a more accurate, nasty one. Why call the Chinese dictatorship by an accurate name when it can be called the *People's Republic of China*? When Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq, why should he have fiddled with the increasingly inaccurate name *Republic of Iraq*? The ruling clique in Myanmar (formerly Burma) surely had ample reason to call its thugs who engaged in mass murder and other kinds of nasty business anything other than the *State Peace and Development Council*. In a slightly different vein, why call diluted beer *watered-down beer* when you can call it *lite*? And doesn't *Department of Defense* have a much sweeter ring to it than the original and more accurate name *War Department*?

The names of political organizations are often heavily sanitized—not so much to hide their agenda as to suggest their agenda in the most generally agreeable terms. There is rhetorical (and so political) benefit in changing your name from the “National Abortion Rights Action League” to “NARAL Pro-Choice America.” Lots of people are against abortion, but who could be against choice? Why should a minority political group call itself *The Moral Minority*, when it can puff itself up into *The Moral Majority*? (Note, by the way, the implication that the individuals in this group are more moral than other people.)

I am firm, you are obstinate, he is pigheaded.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL'S EXAMPLE OF WORDS HAVING SIMILAR COGNITIVE MEANINGS BUT MUCH DIFFERENT EMOTIVE SENSES

The language of diplomacy is particularly prone to tricky manipulation, especially when it refers to provocative international issues. A good case in point was cited by William Safire in his column on language.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, when things were heating up between Israel and the new Hamas government in Palestine, the prime minister, Ehud Olmert, wanted to move 90,000 Israelis from West Bank villages into secure areas behind the fence under construction, but instead of using the word *retreat*, he wanted a synonym that would neither suggest weakness for withdrawing nor imply that the new border was permanent. The Hebrew word chosen was *hitkansut*, or coming together (in a safe place), which seemed an appropriate choice for the Israelis, but the problem came with translating the term for the international community. After several false starts, Olmert and his aides decided on *realignment*, which suggests shifting of the lines to describe their withdrawal plan. Safire notes, “By adjusting the line of separation without seeking to establish a formal border, Israel's purpose is to minimize friction while retaining its historic claim on the land in dispute.” Thus, the carefully chosen translation was an attempt to gain international support for establishing a firm line of separation from Palestine for the present, while leaving open the possibility of reclaiming the disputed land in the future. This type of language manipulation goes on all the time in diplomatic circles, where word choice is often critical in policy explanations.

In recent years, manipulative uses of language have been given a spate of emotively negative names, each with a slightly different connotation, including *double-speak* (deliberately ambiguous or evasive language), *bureaucratese* (governmental doublespeak), *newspeak* (media doublespeak), *academese* (the academic variety), *legalese* (lawyer talk), *gobbledygook*, *bafflegab*, and *jargon*.

Take *militaryese*. The military at all times and places has devised expressions intended as much as possible to hide the fact that war is, to put it mildly, unvarnished hell. For example, the term *waterboarding* sounds more like a harmless water sport than what it really is, a brutal method of torture. Here are some more examples:

Comfort women	Women of conquered countries forced to work as prostitutes “servicing” soldiers (term used by the Japanese during World War II).
Preemptive action	Our side attacking first.
Battle fatigue	Insanity suffered as a result of the unbearable horrors and strains of battle.
Incursion	Invasion.
Collateral damage	People who are inadvertently killed or property that is inadvertently destroyed in warfare.
Ethnic cleansing	Driving out unwanted citizens of a country, burning their houses, and killing some along the way (as in Kosovo, 1999).

<sup>1</sup>Safire, William. “When Diplolingo Does the Job.” *International Herald Tribune*, 11 June 2006.



Enhanced interrogation technique	Torture.
Simulated drowning	Actual drowning that is interrupted.
Smart Bombs	Bombs.
Friendly fire	Shelling friendly villages or troops by mistake.
Servicing a target or visiting a site	Bombing a place flat (used during the Gulf War).
Information extraction	Torturing people into giving confessions.
Pacification center	Concentration camp (itself originally doublespeak).
Termination	Killing (also used by the CIA, where <i>termination with prejudice</i> means <i>assassination</i> ).
Nuclear deterrent	Nuclear weapon.
Selective ordinance	Napalm (used to kill by incineration).
The Final Solution	Plan of the Nazis to murder all European Jews.

During World War II—one of the most awful of all wars—the expression *dehousing industrial workers* was used by the British and Americans to mean killing civilians, including women and children via *saturation* air raids. The indescribably horrible massive air raids on Germany and Japan that created incredible firestorms were said to result in *self-energized dislocation*, not widespread death by either incineration or asphyxiation. The term *war* itself has been euphemized into *conflict* or *operation*. Bush the elder waged “Operation Desert Shield”; Bush the younger, “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” In the latter conflict, the term *war* was used to describe the War on Terrorism or the War for Peace (!), but not the Iraq War, until we were several years into the conflict. During that war, both sides manipulated terminology to suit their own bias. In the United States, the networks used the term *coalition forces* for what the Arab media called *occupation forces*. And when CNN reported that 16 “insurgents” were killed in an Iraqi uprising (May 7, 2004), the Arab media described them as “resistance fighters.” George Orwell got it right when he said, “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” Few people would realize that the harmless terms cited above were devised to sugarcoat the truth, or create a bias, or mask sinister, even hideous practices—unless it were pointed out to them.

Much less dramatic examples of doublespeak are prevalent in other ways. The law has its own version—legalese, a hybrid of French, English, and Latin that baffles the average person. In plain English, a *writ* is a claim form, and a *plaintiff* is someone who makes a complaint against another party. Meetings with the judge *in camera* are just private meetings behind closed doors. Why all this turgid terminology? The principal reason is to ensure certainty, to protect clients by using phrases defined by statutes or case law. Using different expressions may raise doubts as to precisely what is meant.

But why can't plain English accomplish the same thing? Another justification is that it's cheaper and less trouble to use archaic language than to rewrite everything. Maybe, but then again, lawyers might have to charge lower fees if legal documents were clear.

Of course, sometimes, doublespeak is just fuzzy thinking cloaked in garbled metaphors. Take, for example, this episode, bizarre even by the standards of the 2016 presidential election. Ted Cruz accused Donald Trump of planting a story in the *National Enquirer* alleging that Cruz had a number of extramarital affairs. His accusations focused largely on Trump advisor and long-time (some would say notorious) political operative Roger Stone: “I would note that Mr. Stone is a man who has 50 years of dirty tricks behind him. He's a man for whom a term was coined for copulating with a rodent. Well, let me be clear: Donald Trump may be a rat, but I have no desire to copulate with him.” In addition to awkwardly stumbling around a profane expression, Senator Cruz seems to be intimating that he does not wish to have sex with Trump *even though* his opponent is a rat. It is highly unlikely, however, that he chose this moment to come clean about a sexual predilection for rodents.

In recent years, it's possible that doublespeak in the business world has managed to surpass even that of militaryese in its deviousness. Well, maybe not. But consider these examples of euphemisms used when someone is fired:

*bumped, decruited, dehiired, deselected, destaffed, discontinued, disemployed, dislocated, downsized, excessed, involuntarily separated, nonretained, nonrenewed, severed, surplussed, transitioned, vocationally relocated.*<sup>2</sup>

Firing large numbers of workers is *corporate rightsizing*, by the way, and the place where you get *downsized* is sometimes called the *outplacement office*.

The term *reform* is tricky in the business world. For instance, whereas tort reform suggests that limiting damage awards in a court of law is good for us, what it really means is that limiting the victim's right to sue is good for the profit margins of the corporations and people who may be at fault. A *Doonesbury* cartoon (November 20, 1999) nails the deceptive nature of business language by satirizing the owners of start-up companies that earn no money but make millions from IPOs (initial public offerings of stock). One character says, “We'll probably walk away with a fortune. It's only the small investors who get burned. It's called socializing the risk while privatizing the profit.”

These examples illustrate the use of euphemistic language—locutions from which as much negative emotive content as possible has been removed—and the replacement of accurate names with more high-flown locutions. The point generally is to conceal or to mislead, which could be one reason that this kind of talk has become so popular with government officials, lawyers, military officers, doctors, and (alas) a large number of academics. (Is this one reason why so many other [!] textbooks are so dull?)

Interestingly, class differences have always been mirrored euphemistically. Average people *rent* apartments; the rich *lease* them. The nonrich talk of *social climbers*; social climbers like to think of themselves as *upwardly mobile* or (more recently) *changing*

<sup>2</sup>New York Times Service (8 March 1996); mentioned in the July 1996 issue of the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*.



## DOUBLESPEAK FOR EVERYONE

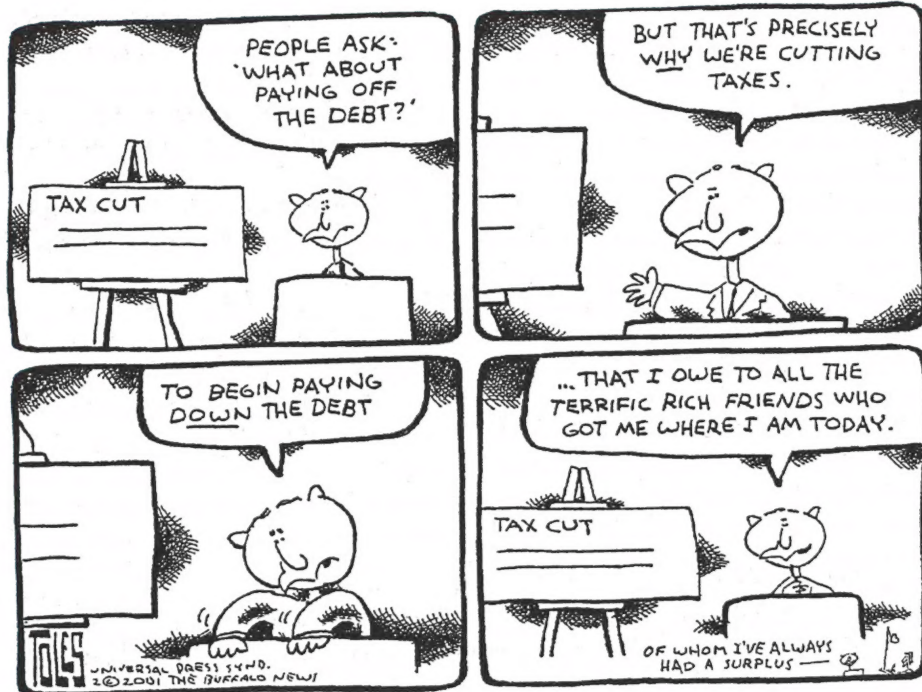
Everyone knows that politics is fertile ground for doublespeak. All political parties use it when it suits their purposes. Here are a few examples noted in John Leo's article "Double Trouble Speak" (*U.S. News & World Report*, 4 July 2005).

### REPUBLICAN

climate change  
trial lawyer  
faith-based  
school choice  
tax relief  
illegal  
fetus  
military difficulties

### DEMOCRAT

global warming  
personal injury lawyer  
Religious  
school vouchers  
tax cuts  
Undocumented  
uterine contents  
Quagmire



TOLES the Buffalo News/Universal Press Syndicate

A play on words that distorts paying off the national debt to mean paying down the debt that this political character owes to his campaign contributors.

course, and not as *pushy* but rather as *emphatic*. The wealthy don't earn a *salary*, they receive *compensation* or have an *income*.

In the field of education, euphemisms abound. (And why should we be different?) One college gives placement tests in *Student Success Workshops*, presumably to soften the blow to the many students who place in remedial (uh, developmental) classes. Teachers no longer *teach* but *facilitate* in *comfort zones* where *collaborative learning* occurs.

Then there is academic doublespeak, especially deadly when it comes in whole sentences or runs on for whole paragraphs. Here, for example, is a tiny snippet from Zellig Harris's well-known text *Structural Linguistics* that makes a simple idea seem more profound:

Another consideration is the availability of simultaneity, in addition to successivity as a relation among linguistic elements.

This seems to mean (there is a certain amount of vagueness here) that we can do two things at once, like gesture while we talk. (Didn't know that, did you?)

The deliberate use of euphemistic language has been going on at least since the beginning of recorded history, but it seems to have increased dramatically in recent years, perhaps because of the professionalization of most trades. Titled professionals want to sound objective and authoritative, not opinionated or biased. Also, controversial topics can be toned down when dressed in euphemistic language. For instance, to lessen its negative connotation, the term *abortion* comes in many guises nowadays: *effecting fetal demise*, *planned cessation of gestation*, *interrupted pregnancy*, *termination*, and *selective reduction*.

It's true that euphemisms can and often do serve useful, nonmanipulative functions. Circumlocutions used to replace offensive four-letter words are good examples. Using expressions like *put to sleep*, *passed gas*, and *for the mature figure* often is just a matter of politeness. Why shock or offend when we don't have to? Nevertheless, all too often euphemisms are used to further Machiavellian purposes. Indeed, the nastier something is, the greater the need to clothe it in neutral garb.

Doublespeak has become so common that we hardly notice it. Euphemisms slide past us without registering and soften our grasp of reality. When politicians "misspeak" rather than lie, we are less likely to hold them accountable. When the military "deploys troops" rather than invades a country, we are less alarmed. When mayors refer to neighborhoods with "substandard housing" rather than slums or ghettos, we are less likely to think of people living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Doublespeak hoodwinks us into thinking wrong is right, dangerous situations are benign, poverty is nonexistent, and we are lulled into a deceptive calm. A misleading phrase here and there may not seem like much, but the cumulative effect is to erode our understanding of what is actually going on in the world. When doublespeak is a buffer between us and reality, we are more likely to be manipulated into mindless acceptance of half-truths, distortions, and lies.

Of course, sometimes attempts to whitewash bad news are so obvious that the American public simply rolls its collective eyes. When a recession loomed in 2008, President Bush avoided the "R word" and talked, instead, about "economic challenges"

<sup>3</sup>Examples are taken from *Doublespeak Defined* by William Lutz, a perceptive compilation and commentary of misleading language.



and “uncertainties,” as in “. . . we have a dynamic economy, but there are some uncertainties.” It didn’t take an economist to recognize the code language for recession. Given the sinking economy and the drain on their pocketbooks, most people fully understood what was going on, and no amount of hedging could convince them otherwise. Unfortunately, many people have trouble seeing through doublespeak until they are personally affected, and sometimes that is too late.

### Orwell on the Orwellian

*The popularity of the writings of George Orwell is an important reason that doublespeak has received more than a usual amount of attention in recent years. In this excerpt from his 1948 classic “Politics and the English Language,” he explains one reason why politicians favor this less-than-straightforward kind of rhetoric:*

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. . . . Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombed from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: This is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: This is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. . . .

The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. *The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.* [These italics added.]

Language in every field, whether it be politics, law, medicine, or any other, is sometimes inflated or obscure and often larded with *jargon*. There are several senses of this term, one being nonsensical, incoherent, or meaningless talk; another, the specialized language used by professionals when talking (or writing) to each other. The trouble is that jargon intended in the professional sense can and often does turn out to be jargon in the meaningless or incoherent sense, making vacuous or otherwise simple and easily understood remarks appear to be profound.

We need to remember, though, that technical terms used by professional people generally do have an important function—namely, to ensure precision when it counts. Lawyers want contracts to be airtight. Doctors need to be sure they understand each other when they talk about patient illnesses. It may be adequate for a layperson to talk, say, about rapid or irregular heartbeats, but cardiologists need a more precise way of distinguishing the various kinds—distinguishing, for example, *supra ventricular tachycardia* from *atrial fibrillation* or from the immediately life-threatening *ventricular fibrillation*. Use of these technical expressions quickly conveys rather precise and absolutely vital information from one doctor to another. Technical jargon used by people in the same field is an essential form of communication, but when it deteriorates into incoherent or meaningless verbiage, it is puzzling at best and incomprehensible at worst.

And when professional lingo is not translated into ordinary language for the average person, it can be troubling, indeed. For example, doctors who tell patients they have a *malignant melanoma* without clarifying the term, may leave them ignorant of the fact that they have a form of skin cancer which quickly leads to death if untreated.

### Language Change

As the world changes, language inevitably changes with it. New words come into common use for things and procedures that didn’t exist just a few years ago; old words take on new meanings. The computer age illustrates this nicely. We now talk glibly of an inanimate variety of mouse, of clipless clipboards, nonedible menus, RAM, ROM, megabytes, and gigabytes. Terabytes are becoming part of everyday use, and we imagine petabytes can’t be far behind. We cut and paste without scissors or glue, and not only delete but also unerase. We surf the (dry) Net and zero in on spiderless websites, navigating with a cursor.

Initially, these new locutions were used and understood primarily by computer nerds and functioned, as professionals generally does, to exclude the uninitiated. But they quickly worked their way into the vocabularies of everyone who uses computers, even though much of what we do with them is word processing or game playing, not mathematical computation. So it goes.

Another common feature of jargon, by the way, is *padding*—adding significant-sounding sentences here and there that in fact say little or nothing. Here is an example typical of a common variety in psychological writings: “Although the effects of mental attitudes on bodily disease should not be exaggerated, neither should they be minimized.” True. And here is an example of another type: “As soon as there are behaviors you can’t generate, then there are responses you can’t elicit.” Yes. And another: “In order to achieve products, outputs, and outcomes through processes, inputs are required.” Absolutely.

## 3. Ambiguity and Vagueness

We have already had one brief look at ambiguity when we discussed the fallacy of equivocation (in Chapter 4). Some ambiguity in speech and writing is unavoidable. But ambiguity can also be used to **obfuscate** (that is, to make too confusing or unclear to be understandable) an argument and misdirect us from its faults, even when there is no equivocation per se. The same could be said of vagueness. We’d do well to discuss them both a bit more here.

First, it will be useful to distinguish between ambiguity and vagueness. You often hear these words used interchangeably, to indicate a general lack of clarity. Strictly speaking, however, a word or phrase is **ambiguous** when it has more than one meaning and the context in which it is used does not adequately indicate which of those multiple meanings is intended.



Whole statements can be ambiguous in any number of different ways, but we can distinguish two main types. **Semantic ambiguity** arises from a particular word or phrase that has multiple meanings (again without sufficient context to determine which is intended). **Syntactic ambiguity** arises from ambiguity in the structure of the sentence itself.

The following exchange from Donald Trump's meeting with the *Washington Post's* editorial board in March 2016 centers on a question of semantic ambiguity, especially over the word "incorrect," which can mean either inaccurate or morally problematic. Trump had called for the "loosening" of libel laws in America, and the *Washington Post* asked him to clarify:

[Frederick] RYAN [*Washington Post* Publisher]: But there's standards like malice is required. Would you weaken that? Would you require less than malice for news organizations?

Donald TRUMP: I would make it so that when someone writes incorrectly, yeah, I think I would get a little bit away from malice without having to get too totally away. Look, I think many of the stories about me are written badly. I don't know if it's malice because the people don't know me.

Stephen STROMBERG, EDITORIAL WRITER: How are you defining "incorrect?" It seems like you're defining it as fairness or your view of fairness rather than accuracy.

TRUMP: Fairness, fairness is, you know, part of the word. But you know, I've had stories that are written that are absolutely incorrect.<sup>4</sup>

An example of syntactic ambiguity also comes to us from the campaign trail in March 2016, specifically this tweet from Bernie Sanders: "I don't believe we should be punishing millions of people with outrageous levels of student debt. That shortsighted path must end." Now, is Sanders saying that we should punish people *who have* outrageous levels of student debt, or is he saying that we should not use outrageous levels of student debt as a punishment (perhaps for poor financial decisions during college)? I don't imagine Sanders endorses either of these things, but it is not entirely clear here which he intended to address. Notice, though, that the ambiguity in the tweet does not result from the ambiguity of any particular word or phrase, but rather from the structure of the sentence that Sanders used.

A word or phrase is **vague** when there is an unsettled range of application for it. Genuine vagueness does not arise when people disagree about the proper application of a word or phrase so much as when a reasonable person will have to admit to some "gray area" in its application. So, for example, this is Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay (quoted in *USA Today* in 2016) on the health risks of playing professional football: "I believe this: that the game has always been a risk, you know, and the way certain people are. Look at it. You take an aspirin, I take an aspirin, it might give you extreme side effects of illness and your body . . . may reject it, where I would be fine. So there is so much we don't know." You'll likely recognize in this statement a fallacy we discussed

<sup>4</sup>"A Transcript of Donald Trump's Meeting with the *Washington Post* Editorial Board." *Washingtonpost.com*, 21 March 2016.

earlier, namely, questionable analogy. The risks of playing football are just not like the risks of taking aspirin. But the argument may have enjoyed some initial plausibility because of the vagueness of "risk." Usually we don't apply this word to something just because it has the remotest chance of causing harm. There is almost nothing on Earth that doesn't. Rather, a risk is something that carries a certain level of possible harm. But where is the threshold for that level? Is going for a walk on a busy street taking a risk? Probably not. Is wingsuiting? Yes. (Look up this craziness if you need to.) How about taking an aspirin? Playing professional football?

Vagueness appears in a couple of different forms. We can have vague predicates such as "is tall." It seems pretty clear that an adult male in 2017 is tall when he's 6'5". It is also clear that he's not tall at 5'4". But what about 6'? Or if you think that is still tall, what about 5'10"? If that is clearly not tall, what about 5'11"? 5'10.5"? As you can see, for each of us there will be some range of heights where it just won't be clear to us if the predicate applies or not.

We also use words that refer vaguely such as "novella," "city," or "glance." There just can't be (at least given the way we commonly use these terms) a clear line of demarcation between a short story and a novella, or a novella and a novel; between a large town and a small city, or between a mere glance and full look.

So when is ambiguity and vagueness problematic? The answer (not trying to be funny here) is, unfortunately, somewhat vague. Ambiguity and vagueness are problematic when they are used intentionally to make a questionable claim seem better than it really is or when they prevent us from being able to tell what is really being claimed at all.

By way of preview, recognizing this problematic sort of ambiguity or vagueness will be especially important later in the text when we consider arguments and rhetoric in advertising and news media in greater detail (Chapters 10 and 11). Ambiguities are especially common in news headlines, mostly because they are (of necessity) short and thus able to provide less context. For instance:

- From *hngn.com* in 2016: "Heart Attacks Are Affecting Younger and Fatter Americans." (Is the average American who suffers a heart attack younger and fatter than he or she used to be, or are more Americans, who happen to be younger and fatter, having more heart attacks than others?)
- From the *New York Daily News* in 2010: "S.C. Dems Split over Surprise Senate Nominee Alvin Greene, Accused of Flashing Porn at Co-ed." (Did Alvin Greene flash porn, or was this poor woman flashed by the entire South Carolina Democratic Party?)
- From the *Toledo Blade* in 2016: "Volunteers Look to Serve Others at Easter Dinner." (Are volunteers serving dinner to other people, or are they serving a horrifying dinner made of other volunteers?)

Interestingly, terms that can be used either relatively or absolutely, like "Rich" and "Poor", sometimes cause trouble. Poverty, for instance, is exceedingly unpleasant anywhere, at any time. But the poor in the United States today are richer in absolute terms with respect to material wealth than the vast majority of people who lived in days of old or who live today in the so-called Third World countries in Africa, Central and South America, and Asia. This important truth is masked by the fact that the term *poor*, in its



relative sense, does apply to those Americans who are poor compared to other Americans, though they may be rich compared to most people who lived in the past or who live in Third World countries today.

Finally, vagueness can be especially problematic in advertising, especially as it can lead consumers to think a claim for a given product is stronger than it really is. Sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s, every other deli in New York City became a “gourmet” deli. A little later they were all “organic” as well. But how much organic produce does a store need to offer in order for it to be an organic market? What does a store need to sell in order to be gourmet? After a while, these terms were used by so many stores (and so many that had no reasonable claim to either title) that they lost all meaning and effectiveness.

### BUT AMBIGUITY OFTEN SERVES USEFUL PURPOSES

Students sometimes get the idea that ambiguity, and certainly equivocation, are always bad. But they aren’t. Ambiguous uses of language, especially metaphorical ones, can be employed for all kinds of good purposes. The well-known psychologist Carl Rogers, for example, used ambiguity effectively in the following passage to emphasize a point:

As a boy I was rather sickly, and my parents have told me that it was predicted I would die young. This prediction has been proven completely wrong in one sense, but has come profoundly true in another sense. I think it is correct that I will never live to be old. So I now agree with the prediction that I will die young.<sup>5</sup>

Ambiguous uses of language also serve to grease the wheels of social intercourse. Benjamin Disraeli, the nineteenth-century British prime minister, often used ambiguity to soften his replies to letters, while still coming close to being truthful, as in his reply to an unsolicited amateur manuscript: “Many thanks; I shall lose no time in reading it.” (In most other contexts, of course, equivocation of this kind is rightly considered to be rather sneaky.)

Ambiguity also serves very useful purposes in literature, particularly in metaphoric passages. It enables writers to introduce multiple meanings quickly into a text in a way that adds significance to what is being said by drawing attention to often rather subtle connections without hitting us over the head with them. For example, the title of William Faulkner’s *Light in August* may plausibly refer to the quality of sunlight in late-summer Mississippi (where the novel is set), to a house fire that occurs in the novel, or to the “light” of revelation of one sort or another, a constant theme of the novel. The title “works” in a sense because it captures all three of these at once.

Again, the difference between these acceptable, even laudable uses of ambiguity and the problematic kind is that in none of these acceptable cases is an argument or claim made to seem better than it really is. Rather, the ambiguity is used to better display the richness of the argument or claim in question.

<sup>5</sup>Rogers, Carl. *The Carl Rogers Reader*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. Reprint of article in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Fall 1980).

## 4. Other Common Rhetorical Devices

Let’s now look at a few of the many other rhetorical devices that are frequently used to manipulate the unwary or less knowledgeable. (This does not mean that these devices cannot be used in the service of truth and justice!)

### tone

Good writers or speakers try to choose the **tone** best suited to their audience, as students are taught to do in writing classes. Tone expresses attitudes or feelings—of compassion, anger, levity, humility, congeniality, and so on—and can be quite powerful when employed properly in argumentative passages. Using the proper tone, even though doing so clearly plays to emotions, isn’t like arguing fallaciously or from premises known to be false, but rather is just a matter of common sense; arguments aren’t won by unnecessarily ruffling the other guy’s feathers.

But tone can be employed for nefarious purposes, not just virtuous ones. Lawyers addressing juries are masters of the art, as are politicians addressing constituents. Success in politics requires knowing how to use the tone of “Mom and apple pie” rhetoric when addressing, say, families of soldiers returning from overseas duty, and humor when dealing with matters of a lighter nature. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from the veto by Adlai Stevenson, then governor of Illinois, of a bill to protect birds by restraining the roaming of cats:

It is in the nature of cats to do a certain amount of unescorted roaming. . . . That cats destroy some birds, I well know, but I believe this legislation would further but little the worthy cause to which its proponents give such unselfish effort. The problem of the cat versus the bird is as old as time. If we attempt to resolve it by legislation, who knows but what we may be called upon to take sides as well in the age-old problem of dog versus cat, bird versus bird, or even bird versus worm. In my opinion, the state of Illinois . . . already has enough to do without trying to control feline delinquency.

Just the right touch to put the quash on a bill that members of the legislature cared little about anyway. By using elevated language to explain his decision on a rather minor matter, and by carrying the consequences of the vetoed bill’s logic to ridiculous lengths, Stevenson managed to undermine the opposition with gentle humor and without offending anyone. (Stevenson, by the way, was rightly famous for his ironic humor; witness his remark when accused of being an “egghead”: “Eggheads of the world unite; all we have to lose are our yolks.”)

Contrast the tone of the Stevenson veto with the following excerpt from the best-known speech by Winston Churchill, a master at the trade. It is taken from the end of an address to the British Parliament in the summer of 1940, during the darkest days of World War II, when the British expected to be invaded by German armies flush with recent and spectacular victories in France—a time when most observers believed Britain was about to be crushed by German military power:

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight . . . on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight



on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender and even if, which I do not for the moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God's good time the New World, with all its power and might, sets forth to the liberation and rescue of the Old.

The point of Churchill's rhetoric was to buck up the courage of the British people—to stiffen their resolve to fight in the face of terrible odds—and the tone of his speech, not to mention its content, accomplished exactly that. (Incidentally, Churchill's address was not recorded; the recording frequently heard of this momentous speech is by someone else, later.)

## SLANTING

**Slanting** is a form of misrepresentation. In one version, a true statement is made so as to imply or suggest something else (usually either false or not known to be true). For example, a defense lawyer may try to blunt damaging testimony by stating, "All this proves is that . . ." or "Since we willingly admit that . . .," implying that the testimony is of little importance when in fact it is quite damaging. Or an advertisement may say, "Try our best-quality knife, *only* \$9.95," implying that the price is very low when in fact it may be just the ordinary price.

Slanting creeps into objective news reports, as in this example from a *Wall Street Journal* article (1 February 2012) explaining super PAC donations to candidates. "In Iowa and Florida, the pro-Romney PAC unleashed a torrent of negative ads that helped dent Mr. Gingrich's poll numbers." The phrase "unleashed a torrent" suggests a virulent attack on an opponent, but the explanation of Gingrich's expenditures that followed is benign. "Mr. Gingrich's super PAC has spent a total of \$4.4 million on ads, while his campaign has spent \$2.7 million on ads." No mention here of *his* campaign's "torrent" of attack ads on Romney in Florida. A subtle slant, but one that creates a bias.

Slanting also can be accomplished by a careful selection of facts. (So slanting often involves the fallacy of suppressed evidence, discussed in Chapter 3.) For example, the authors of most U.S. history texts used in public schools select facts so as to sanitize American history as much as they can (given the general stricture against wandering too far from the straight and narrow). The point of public school history texts, after all, is not to produce disaffected citizens. Slanting, also, subtly promotes textbook biases. Now that multiculturalism has nudged out Eurocentrism, history books tend to romanticize Native Americans, for instance, and criticize the actions of white settlers. The word *massacre* is invariably used to describe whites attacking Native Americans, but not when the situation is reversed and settlers are the victims of atrocities committed by Native Americans.

It's no secret that political parties slant information to favor their agendas. Under the second President Bush, for example, health information on government websites was subtly changed to reflect the administration's ideology. On the National Cancer Institute website, the statement that there was "no association between abortion and breast cancer" was changed to "the evidence is inconclusive." And the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention used to explain that condoms could protect people effectively from HIV infection, but the revision claimed that "more research is needed."

Slanting sometimes goes under the name *suggestion* or, in some cases, the more pejorative name *innuendo*. The latter term might well be applied to Jeffrey R. Tucker, who wrote the following about Trump for *Newsweek* in 2015: "Because Trump is the only one who speaks this way, he can count on support from the darkest elements of American life. He doesn't need to actually advocate racial homogeneity, call for whites-only signs to be hung at immigration control or push for expulsion or extermination of undesirables. Because such views are verboten, he has the field alone, and he can count on the support of those who think that way by making the right noises." Tucker here stops short of saying that Trump does (or would, for votes) endorse segregation or "extermination," and if pressed, he could deny that he was making any such claim. The nice thing about slanting, so far as practitioners of the art are concerned, is that you can always deny that you implied or suggested what you in fact have implied or suggested.

### Suggestion Can Be Dangerous

*Monroe C. Beardsley was one of the first to write a textbook dealing strictly with critical reasoning (as opposed to formal logic). In this excerpt from his book Thinking Straight, he explains an example of suggestion:*

On November 30, 1968, the *New York Times* reported on the construction site for a new jetport in the Everglades, 40 miles from Miami:

*Populated now by deer, alligators, wild turkeys, and a tribe of Indians who annually perform a rite known as the Green Corn Dance, the tract could someday accommodate a super jetport twice the size of Kennedy International in New York and still have a one-mile buffer on every side to minimize intrusion in the lives of any eventual residents.*

A more horrible example of suggestion could hardly be found. First, note that by putting the Indians in a list with deer, alligators, and wild turkeys, the writer suggests that they belong in the same category as these subhuman species. This impression is reinforced by the allusion to the "Green Corn Dance," which (since it is irrelevant to the rest of the story) can only suggest that this kind of silly superstitious activity sums up their lives. And the impression is driven home sharply at the end when we get to the need to "minimize intrusions on the lives of any eventual residents"—the Indians, of course, can hardly be counted as real residents.

—*Thinking Straight*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975.

## WEASEL WORDS

**Weasel words** (or phrases) are locutions that appear to make little or no change in the content of a statement while in fact sucking out all or most of its content. (Weasels often suck out the content of eggs without breaking their shells.) Typical is the use of the terms *may* or *may be*, as in this example from a student paper: "Economic success *may be* the explanation of male dominance over females" (italics added). Using the expression *may be* instead of the straightforward verb *is* protected the student from error by reducing the content of her statement close to zero. What she said is consistent with the



economic success of males *not* being the reason for male dominance. By the way, note the assumption that males do dominate females in the last analysis, a contention some males (and females!) would deny. The term *arguably* is another weasel word frequently employed to spruce up weak arguments. The student quoted here might just as well have protected herself by stating that “Economic success *arguably* is the explanation for male dominance over females.”

Weasel words are the stock and trade of most politicians when discussing controversial issues—and they can be subtle. For example, when President Obama went to Ohio in 2011 to spread the good news about the improved economy of the automobile industry, he had this to say on his weekly radio address: “Chrysler has repaid every dime and more of what it owes American taxpayers for their support during my presidency.”<sup>6</sup> Literally this was true. Chrysler *did* repay the \$8.5 billion that the Obama administration lent the corporation—but not the \$4 billion loan from the Bush administration. Obama weaseled out of that one.

### FINE-PRINT DISCLAIMERS

Another common trick is to take back unobtrusively in the (usually) unread fine print what is claimed in the most easily read part of a document. Schlock insurance policies are notorious for their use of this device. They tout wonderful coverage in large type while taking it away in the fine print. When private property is damaged by earthquakes, tornadoes, or hurricanes, for instance, people usually think they are sufficiently insured against damage from natural disasters, but they often discover to their chagrin that upfront promises of replacement cash are severely limited in the fine print of their insurance policies.

Advertisers regularly use very small asterisks to direct readers to the bottom of ads, where they find out, say, that to get the “low-low” airline fare, tickets must be purchased 21 days in advance and cover a stay over at least one Saturday, and also learn that “other restrictions may apply” (note the weasel word *may*, hiding the fact that they do).

Fine-print disclaimers have become so odious that advertisers have begun to play on the fact with a bit of humor, announcing (as some Lexus auto commercials did) that their lawyers have gone into paroxysms of joy while writing the fine print that is then scrolled across the TV screen (very quickly, so it can’t be read—but that’s part of the humor).

A variation of the fine-print disclaimer is the sneaky stipulation buried in contracts. A blatant example of this fine-print finagling occurred in the case of a fellow named Jim Turner, who rented a car in Connecticut, but discovered when he returned it to the car rental company that he had been charged \$450 because of a stipulation in the contract that “fined” the driver \$150 every time the speed exceeded 79 miles per hour. His car had been tracked by satellite over seven states! Alas, poor Mr. Turner didn’t read the fine print in the contract when the agent asked him to sign his initials by the X.

Another variation on the fine-print disclaimer gambit is the *reinterpretation* ploy. Having said what turns out to be unpopular, or perhaps offensive, the best strategy for a politician often is just to reinterpret the ill-advised remark. On one of the tapes released by Gennifer Flowers, Bill Clinton is heard making a remark that clearly implies he thought Mario Cuomo (then governor of New York) acted like a mafioso. When the

<sup>6</sup>Cited in: Kessler, Glenn. “President Obama’s Phony Accounting on the Auto Industry.” *Washington Post*, 6 June 2011.

tapes became public, an embarrassed Clinton apologized, which is the right thing to do when caught with . . . uh . . . one’s pants down, but also stated that “I meant simply to imply that Governor Cuomo is a tough, worthy competitor,” which was a clever, but somewhat shady, reinterpretation of his remarks.

### EVASION (AGAIN)

Recall our conversation of evasion in Chapter 3. There we focused on the practice as part of a fallacious argumentative strategy. Its prevalence, however, means that we should consider it again here as an unfortunate rhetorical device. It is sometimes shocking how often people get away with evasion in public life. An issue or question can be *evaded* by *wandering from the point* or by snowing one’s audience with an immense amount of detail in the hope that they either won’t notice or at least won’t press the point.

Whenever politicians debate one another, evasion is on full display. We could use any major debate over the last decade, but this is a particularly good example: In the first Republican debate of the 2016 primary season, moderator and Fox News anchor Chris Wallace had this exchange with Ohio governor and presidential candidate John Kasich:

WALLACE: Governor Kasich, I know you don’t like to talk about Donald Trump. But I do want to ask you about the merit of what he just said. When you say that the American government is stupid, that the Mexican government is sending criminals, that we’re being bamboozled, is that an adequate response to the question of illegal immigration?

KASICH: Chris, first of all, I was just saying to Chris Christie, they say we’re outspoken, we need to take lessons from Donald Trump if we’re really going to learn it. Here is the thing about Donald Trump. Donald Trump is hitting a nerve in this country. He is. He’s hitting a nerve. People are frustrated. They’re fed up. They don’t think the government is working for them. And for people who want to just tune him out, they’re making a mistake.

Now, he’s got his solutions. Some of us have other solutions. You know, look, I balanced the federal budget as one of the chief architects when I was in Washington. Hasn’t been done since. I was a military reformer. I took the state of Ohio from an \$8 billion hole and a 350,000 job loss to a \$2 billion surplus and a gain of 350,000 jobs.

WALLACE: Respectfully, can we talk about illegal immigration?

KASICH: But the point is that we all have solutions. Mr. Trump is touching a nerve because people want the wall to be built. They want to see an end to illegal immigration. They want to see it, and we all do. But we all have different ways of getting there. And you’re going to hear from all of us tonight about what our ideas are.

WALLACE: All right, well, Senator Rubio, let me see if I can do better with you . . .

By the way, it needs to be said that not all wandering from the point is evasive. We have to say this here because the many asides in this textbook (like the one you’re reading right now) definitely are not intended as obfuscations, but merely as remarks about related or secondary matters that, it is hoped, the reader will find either interesting or informative.





*"Let me answer your question about farm subsidies  
by saying a few words about Benghazi."*

David Sipress The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

*After an attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, Libya, the Obama administration and especially then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came under constant fire from political opponents for their handling of security in Libya, the attack itself, and its aftermath.*

## 5. Language Manipulators

People manipulate language for all sorts of reasons: to flatter, to impress, to persuade, to obfuscate, and to distort the truth—to name a few. Sometimes language manipulation is benign, but when it is done to benefit those in power, it can undermine the rights of others. Often the point of redefining language is to circumvent legal stipulations or to justify inequities—as noted below.

When the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib hit the news, officials in the Bush administration claimed it was the work of a few bad apples, but skeptics dug deeper and came up with the Justice Department's interpretation of existing laws banning torture abroad (posted on the *Washington Post* website, June 14, 2004). In Section 2340 of the U.S. Criminal Code, torture is defined as any act "specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering . . . upon another person within his custody or physical control." The Justice Department's legalistic explanation (written in June 2002) was that "mere" pain wasn't enough. "Physical pain amounting to torture must be equivalent

in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death."<sup>7</sup> This interpretation seems to make torture legal, unless it is extreme.

As for the fate of interrogators "who might arguably cross the line drawn in Section 2340" and be charged with torture—not to worry: They could claim they acted out of "necessity" or "self-defense," pleas that "would potentially alleviate criminal liability." In other words, they could get off the hook.

### THOSE WHO CONTROL THE DEFINITIONS . . .

Calling something by just the right name is crucial when you want to bend the law in your favor, influence public opinion, or justify funny business of one kind or another. For example, employers who want to pay employees less than the legal minimum wage or escape contractual obligations to provide health and other benefits to employees need only categorize them as *subcontractors* and arrange paperwork accordingly. Minimum wage laws in the United States apply to employees but not to subcontractors; union-brokered agreements concerning employee health insurance don't cover subcontractors.<sup>8</sup> Attempts at this kind of chicanery via definition occasionally have been overturned by the courts, but often they are successful.

The food industry is plagued with misleading labels initiated by special interest groups who change the meaning of words used to describe food. For example, in 2003, the House and Senate passed a huge federal spending bill with the last-minute provision that meat, poultry, and dairy products could be labeled "organic" even if the animals were fed partly or entirely nonorganic feed. This rider was added to the bill on behalf of Fieldale Farms, which complained about the supply of organic feed (though organic farmers say that what is really at issue is the price, not the supply—which is sufficient). So when does organic mean organic?

Closer to home, college administrators manage to cope with shrinking budgets by hiring lots of cheap labor, often referred to as *adjunct faculty* to distinguish them from "tenure-track" professors. Teachers hired as adjunct faculty earn a good deal less per course than do their tenured colleagues; receive many fewer, if any, fringe benefits; and don't enjoy similar job security. This division of labor can be thought of as an academic analogue to the "downsizing" that goes on in the business world.

On a worldwide level, rich nations manage to undercut the labor force of poor ones by manipulating the language of international agreements to their advantage. Farm subsidies unfairly undercut the agricultural industry of developing countries, particularly in Africa, where most farmers are desperately poor, partly because they cannot compete with the subsidized products from the United States and European Union (EU). A world trade agreement was drawn up to prevent this situation from occurring, but the United States and the EU managed to slide out of it by simply using different language for export subsidies. For instance, instead of violating the agreement with "trade-distorting"

<sup>7</sup>Taken from: "Small Comfort." *Washington Post*, 15 June 2004.

<sup>8</sup>While billionaire Bill Gates was becoming the richest person in the world, his Microsoft Corporation was using the subcontractor ploy to stiff over a thousand of his employees out of several perks other employees were entitled to. At one time or another, Microsoft has been embroiled in court battles over employee classification since 1990.



subsidies by paying farmers according to the amount they produce, the EU gives them direct grants that have almost the same effect on the price of these crops as before but are now called “non-distorting” because grants are determined by the amount of land a farmer owns and how much the land produced in the past.<sup>9</sup> Thus the EU is able to undercut the labor force of developing countries without breaking the trade agreement.

Although the U.S. Constitution grants Congress the sole right to declare war, this has rarely deterred American presidents from waging war without obtaining any such declaration. As we noted earlier in the chapter, they have simply renamed their escapades or declared them not to be wars. The American wars in Korea and Vietnam were described (at least in their early stages) as “police actions” since no “war” had been declared. Assuming the December 1990 congressional measure allowing President Bush (the elder) to carry out United Nations (UN) resolutions did indeed constitute a declaration of war, even though it didn’t actually say we were declaring war, then that Gulf conflict is very likely the only legal war out of at least five fought by the United States since World War II.

In 2002, Congress gave President Bush (the younger) authorization to use the armed forces as he considered necessary to defend our country’s national security against the threat of Iraq and to enforce the UN Security Council resolutions with regard to Iraq. Thus Congress gave Bush the authority to wage war on Iraq but managed to avoid a

### Just “Folks”

*How much can you squeeze out of a single word, like folks, for example? A lot, according to Susan Anthony. In a trenchant analysis of the dumbing down of America, she explains how the ubiquitous use of folks is symptomatic of the erosion of cultural standards in this country.*

The word is everywhere, a plague spread by the President of the United States, television anchors, radio talk show hosts, preachers in megachurches, self-help gurus, and anyone else attempting to demonstrate his or her identification with ordinary, presumably wholesome American values. Only a few decades ago, Americans were addressed as people or, in the more distant past, ladies and gentlemen. Now we are all folks. . . . [as in “our prayers go out to those folks” or “I’ve been in contact with our homeland security folks.”]

The specific political use of folks . . . designed to make the speaker sound like one of the boys or girls, is symptomatic of a debasement in public speech inseparable from a more general erosion of American cultural standards. . . . Look up any important presidential speech in the history of the United States before 1980 and you will not find one patronizing appeal to folks. Imagine: “We here highly resolve that these folks shall not have died in vain . . . and that government of the folks, by the folks, for the folks, shall not perish from the earth.”

—*The Age of American Unreason*. New York: Pantheon, 2008. 3–4.

<sup>9</sup>For more on this, see the (London) *Guardian*, 3 June 2003.

congressional declaration of war. This equivocation enabled Congress to pass the buck and avoid criticism if the war went badly.<sup>10</sup>

In the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration classified as “enemy combatants” hundreds of suspected al Qaeda and Taliban fighters detained by the United States at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. Had they been called “prisoners of war,” they would have been entitled to release when the war was over, but as “enemy combatants,” not only could they be detained indefinitely for questioning without charge, they couldn’t challenge their imprisonment in court, nor were they entitled to any other constitutional rights. The case to reverse this decision was appealed for years until it finally worked its way up to the Supreme Court in 2008. In *Boumediene v. Bush*, the Court ruled that aliens detained as enemy combatants in Guantanamo have a constitutional right to challenge their detention in American courts. Will this ruling stand, or will the term *enemy combatants* morph into another category that manages to slide past the law?

When President Obama took office, his administration immediately began rebranding military activities without necessarily changing the policies.<sup>11</sup> Cut from the vocabulary were favorites of the Bush administration like “surge,” “enemy combatants,” and “war on terror.” As Senate majority leader Harry Reid said when Obama increased troop levels in Afghanistan, “Whatever you do, don’t call it a surge.” So tens of thousands of troops were sent to Afghanistan, but it wasn’t a “surge.” Captives were still held at Guantanamo Bay, but they weren’t “enemy combatants.” The War on Terror morphed into “overseas contingency operations.” And the controversial U.S. Patriot Act (a euphemism if there ever was one) that allowed eavesdropping without warrant was renamed the Terrorist Surveillance Program. One of the first items on a new president’s agenda is to revise the lexicon to make it seem as though it reflects a change in policy.

Sometimes common sense prevails, and redefinition backfires. In 2015, presidential candidate Ben Carson had the following exchange with *Meet the Press*’ Chuck Todd (NBC, September 20, 2015):

CHUCK TODD: Should a President’s faith matter? Should your faith matter to voters?

DR. BEN CARSON: Well, I guess it depends on what that faith is. If it’s inconsistent with the values and principles of America, then of course it should matter. But if it fits within the realm of America and consistent with the Constitution, no problem.

CHUCK TODD: So do you believe that Islam is consistent with the constitution?

DR. BEN CARSON: No, I don’t, I do not.

CHUCK TODD: So you—

DR. BEN CARSON: I would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation. I absolutely would not agree with that.

This last comment understandably caused a bit of controversy for Carson, so much in fact that he felt the need to clear up just how he was using the word “Muslim.” For that

<sup>10</sup>See: Dorf, Michael C. “Is the War on Iraq Lawful?” Web. 19 March 2003. <http://writ.news.findlaw.com/dorf/20030319.html>.

<sup>11</sup>See: Baker, Peter. “The Words Change, if Not the Policies.” *New York Times*, 3 April 2009.



he chose the much more sympathetic environs of the conservative-leaning *Sean Hannity Show*. From that conversation the very next day (Fox News, September 21, 2015):

HANNITY: OK. But, well, then so basically the controversy is over in that sense. You're saying, did you mean to say "radical Islamist" or one that supports a form of government as is practiced in Muslim countries, is that more what you meant to say?

CARSON: Well, you know, that was implied in the comment, because I prefaced that by saying I don't care what religion or faith someone belongs to if they're willing to subjugate that to the American way and to our Constitution, then I have no problem with it. That's what I said before that.

That's not exactly what he said, but okay. Hannity declared the controversy over, so nothing to see here, right? Carson just meant "radical Islamist" by "Muslim." The meaning that he just made up was implied, somehow. We can definitely agree that it would be bad to have a radical Islamist in the White House: But let's go back to the original conversation on *Meet the Press*, right from where we left off:

CHUCK TODD: And would you ever consider voting for a Muslim for Congress?

DR. BEN CARSON: Congress is a different story, but it depends on who that Muslim is and what their policies are, just as it depends on what anybody else says, you know.

So putting all this together, we have to conclude that Ben Carson might well vote for a radical Islamist (or, as he likes to say, "Muslim") for Congress. But that's surely not what he'd like us to conclude. As much as this is a lesson in the perils of backtracking through redefinition, it is also yet another lesson that politicians will often say just about whatever they think they can get away with at the moment they're saying it.

When lesser-known people manipulate language to their own ends, though, it often slips under the radar. Take, for instance, a German teenager, Helene Hegemann, who infused her best-selling novel about clubbing and drugging in Berlin with passages lifted from other writers' works. When her plagiarism was discovered, her response was to turn it on its head. "There's no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity." (Whatever that means.) No apology given, despite the uproar it caused, and no consequences, either. In fact, the book was nominated for a \$20,000 fiction prize at the Leipzig Book Fair. By claiming that she didn't feel she was stealing "because she put all the material into a completely different and unique context," she managed to double-speak her way out of blame. How many students could get away with that one?

When language is manipulated, it isn't always easy to determine whether there is some sort of sleight of hand going on. For years, the psychologist Thomas Szasz campaigned against the use of the expression *mental illness*, on grounds that there is no such thing as *mental illness*. Declaring John Hinckley "not guilty by reason of insanity" after his attempt to assassinate President Reagan was for Szasz just an extreme example of what happens when we take the analogy between physical illness and alleged mental illness seriously. (He did believe, however, that sometimes what is thought of as mental illness really is physical dysfunction.)

But Szasz is in the minority on this point, with the result, he claimed, that various kinds of serious abuses of civil rights occur. One is that close relatives of the "mentally ill" often are able to have them "hospitalized for treatment" against their will. Forcing people into institutions in this way is a practice some see as not unlike the one that used to be common in the Soviet Union of confining political opponents in "mental institutions." In a similar vein, Szasz argued, "we call self-starvation either *anorexia nervosa*, a *hunger strike*, a *suicide attempt*, or some other name, depending on how we want to respond."

Well, then, is Szasz right about this? A number of psychologists find his position modestly persuasive, while the majority do not. The reason for this split of opinion is that good arguments can be made on both sides of the issue, making it difficult to choose one over the other. Which choice we should make may well depend, as Szasz noted, on how we wish to deal with whatever circumstances our decisions affect. (Philosophy students might note the connection of this sort of case to the age-old conundrum about whether, when every part of an old ship has been replaced over the years by a new part, it is still the same ship; the answer, at least a third of this writing team believes, is that it depends on who we wish to say "built" a ship repaired in this way, not on any truth written in the sky.)

## THOSE WHO FRAME PUBLIC POLICY

Redefining words is one way to influence public opinion; another is to use loaded language to evoke a worldview that persuades people to adopt policies—even if these policies go against their own interests. Over the past decade, George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, has become well known (and controversial) for developing a theory about the science and art of framing the debate that has attracted attention across the political spectrum.

*Conservative, n.* A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.

—AMBROSE BIERCE (*THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY*)

Lakoff defines frames as "mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies."<sup>12</sup>

We recognize frames through language, and since people usually make decisions about politics based on their values, the language creates the frame that evokes those

<sup>12</sup>Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant*. White River Junction, VA: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004. xv.



values. Lakoff uses as an example the loaded phrase “tax relief,” conjured up by Republicans to hype their campaign for tax cuts (a neutral, but accurate term). The notion of relief suggests that there is an affliction that must be removed. Those who remove the affliction are the good guys; those who oppose it, the bad guys. The “frame” taps into the voters’ value systems, and they, in turn, buy into the idea. Meanwhile the media repeats the phrase over and over until it enters the political lexicon.

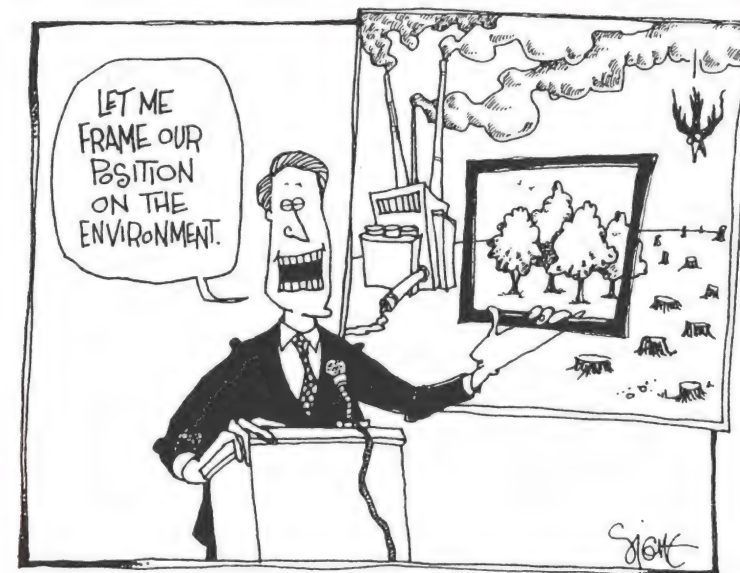
In recent budget battles, the term “tax relief” has continued to evolve in ever more creative ways. When Democrats proposed closing special interest loopholes in the tax code to regain billions of dollars lost to offshore tax havens, house Republicans labeled it a “tax hike,” vowing that such tax increases cannot pass in the House. Buried by this doublespeak is the fact that companies use these gimmicks to avoid paying taxes already levied on them—in no sense are they tax hikes. But the frame hoodwinks people into believing that they are. Other examples include the ominous-sounding “death tax” and the emotionally charged “partial birth abortion,” loaded phrases that nudge voters into supporting tax cuts and banning third-term abortions.

Democrats invented their own political frames. When Republicans threatened to eliminate the filibuster procedure that Democrats were using to prevent a quick confirmation of Bush-appointed judges, the Democrats framed their attack as an “abuse of power.” Day after day they hammered away at the message that they were fighting for democracy against a Republican abuse of power that was not what our founders intended. This frame evoked the worldview that we value democracy and want to preserve it. Republicans were attempting to undermine democracy by eliminating the filibuster, an American birthright that is central to our republic. In fact, the filibuster is a parliamentary procedure (not a birthright) that is typically used to prevent the Senate majority from ending a debate. The Democrats were actually breaking tradition in using it to block the confirmation of an entire slate of judges. Nonetheless the public was persuaded, and Republicans backed down under pressure.<sup>13</sup> It’s not surprising, though, that Republicans had no qualms about using this trick repeatedly to block the Democratic agenda once Barack Obama became president.

Whether or not we agree with Lakoff’s theory, there is enough truth in it to make us wary of the way politicians use language to manipulate us to side with them on critical issues.

Psychologists use the term *framing effects* to describe similar phenomena that influence our decisions. For instance, weight-conscious people are more likely to eat hamburgers described as 90 percent lean rather than 10 percent fat, even though the amount of fat is the same in either case. Charities rake in more money when they urge donors to give pennies a day rather than dollars per year. People are more likely to spend money described as a bonus (because it is extra income and thus dispensable) and more likely to save money described as a rebate (because it implies a return on money spent within their income that should not be squandered). And, of course, advertisers regularly rely on framing effects to manipulate consumers into buying their products.

<sup>13</sup>For more on this see: Bai, Matt. “The Framing Wars.” *New York Times Magazine*, 17 July 2005—an in-depth discussion of Lakoff’s theory.



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## 6. Some Subtle Issues

Sometimes our use of language can manipulate, evade, or bend claims in more subtle ways. Like the rhetorical devices we discussed just now, these are not necessarily always bad things, but they’re certainly things about which we need to be aware as we approach rhetorical and argumentative texts and speech.

### USE AND MENTION

We do lots of different things with words. We state claims, issue commands, ask questions, make declarations, perform ceremonies, express attitudes, and unleash exclamations. We use individual words to refer to people, objects, actions, properties, ideas, forces, feelings and (almost) all other sorts of things. One thing that we can refer to with a particular word is the word itself.

Philosophers and linguists offer us a useful distinction between *using* a word to refer to something and *mentioning* the word—roughly speaking, referring to the word itself. In written language, we have certain conventions to distinguish use and mention, most notably quotation marks or italics. We’ll just use quotation marks here. So we clearly use the word “chair” in the sentence “Please have a seat in this chair.” And we mention the word “chair” in the sentence “‘Chair’ has five letters.” We are highly unlikely to make a mistake in a case like this. We can’t sit on words; and chairs can have seats, legs, armrests, backs, etc., but not letters. You may be surprised, though, how much confusion and trouble we can get up to when we don’t sufficiently appreciate this distinction.



One example comes to us from Fox News (June 22, 2015, via a transcript on Foxnews.com):

I'm David Webb, in for Sean [Hannity] tonight. Thank you for joining us.

Over the weekend, during a podcast with a comedian, Marc Maron, President Obama sparked controversy during a discussion about race when he used the n-word to convey his point. Listen to this.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Racism, we are not cured of it, clearly. And it's not just a matter of it not being polite to say (DELETED) in public. That's not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It's not just a matter of overt discrimination. We have to—societies don't overnight completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

WEBB: So is the dialogue you just heard advancing Americans' discussion about race? Joining me to respond, criminal defense attorney Eric Guster, executive director of TheTeaParty.net, my good friend, Niger Innis, and Fox News contributor Deneen Borelli. Ladies first. Deneen, President Obama's comments and the dignity of the office.

DENEEN BORELLI, FOX NEWS CONTRIBUTOR: It's outrageous, David. I think he has absolutely lowered the standard in terms of being president of the United States. He made no mention of racism in America when he ran for president not once but twice. And I have dubbed him today rapper-in-chief for using such language.

Had President Obama *used* such language, this may have been a real controversy and something deserving of leading a national news segment. But of course, he did no such thing.

## QUOTATIONS

We just discussed one application of quotation marks. A far more common use, of course, is marking off when we are referring to someone else's words rather than using our own. But quotations have their own pitfalls and opportunities for chicanery.

One common deceptive use of quotations involves distancing ourselves from claims we would like to make ourselves but know it's inopportune to do so. This sort of rhetorical move is especially common in politics, and facilitated by Twitter's "retweeting" function. This, for instance, was sent from Donald Trump's account in 2015 (and then was subsequently deleted): "@mplefty67: If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?" This is clearly not an appropriate joke for a presidential candidate to make. But is it any different because he's just quoting @mplefty67?

We should be particularly suspicious when someone doesn't attribute the quote to a particular person, but instead appeals to what "they" say. Trump got a question on *Meet the Press* similar to the one that tripped up Ben Carson, about whether he'd be

comfortable with a Muslim president. His reply: "I mean, some people have said it already happened, frankly. But of course you wouldn't agree with that." Trump can claim, then, that *he* isn't intimating that President Obama is secretly Muslim, he's just helpfully reporting on what "some people" have said.

Of course, quoting without attribution is no worse than misquoting someone—whether we're making an opponent's claims worse than they are (leading to the "straw man" fallacy discussed in Chapter 3) or making some authority seem more amenable to our position than they actually are. During the 2016 campaign, Ted Cruz's spokesman Rick Tyler shared a video of Cruz's opponent Marco Rubio saying something not quite intelligible to a Cruz staffer who was reading a Bible. The subtitles on the video had him



JOEDATOR

*"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be taken out of context and put on Twitter and then it'll be a whole thing."*



saying the Bible has “not many answers.” Apparently, Rubio actually said the Bible has “all the answers.” To Cruz’s credit, Tyler lost his position over the incident.

Perhaps not as egregious as the manufactured quote, quoting out of context can be just as deceptive a practice. In 2016, the *Los Angeles Times* printed a headline that was sure to grab the attention of fans of the television show *The Office*: “Jenna Fischer was ‘genuinely in love’ with ‘Office’ costar John Krasinski.” Fischer and Krasinski played characters whose romantic relationship was a major part of the show’s plot. Here, though, is Fischer’s complete quote: “John and I have real chemistry. There’s a real part of me that is Pam and a real part of him that’s Jim. And those parts of us were genuinely in love with one another.” That quote, which sounds much more like a claim about a good *acting* relationship, is a far cry from what the headline (or, indeed, the body of the story) suggests.

One more note on quotations. People often use common expressions, or “sayings,” and think they’re quoting something like common sense. Indeed, a recognized expression too often counts for more than an actual argument. This is one of our odder habits. A claim is not more likely to be true because it is often repeated. Sometimes the results of this are illogical, and sometimes they’re ridiculous. Take, for instance, the way people commonly refer to “the exception that proves the rule,” as when they want to dismiss an exception to a favored principle. “Well, that’s the exception that proves the rule.” But exceptions refute the generality of rules, not prove them. The expression’s original (and reasonable) usage does not mean that an exception to a rule proves it to be true. Rather, the expression meant that indicating an exception suggests that there is a (non-universal) rule in the first place—not that the rule holds universally. So, for instance, when a teacher says “a student who does not turn in a draft cannot turn in a final paper,” there is an implication that students (at least those who do turn in a draft) can turn in a final paper.

## THE PASSIVE VOICE

At some point, probably, a composition teacher has told you that you should write in an active rather than passive voice. So you should write “I want to do well” rather than “doing well is wanted by me,” and even “the butler murdered the lord of the house” rather than “the lord of the house was murdered by the butler.” As stylistic advice, this is probably a bit fussy. But this is not only a stylistic issue.

Because it makes the subject of a sentence the person or thing being acted upon rather than the one doing the acting, the passive voice allows speakers a grammatical trick for distancing them from unpleasant admissions. The public non-apology apology has become something of a cliché: “mistakes were made” rather than “I made mistakes.” The offender, but not the offense, disappears from the sentence.

As one of a plethora of available examples, consider this from a statement from Congressman Randy Weber apologizing for a tweet that compared President Obama to Hitler (remember the guilt by association fallacy):

I need to first apologize to all those offended by my tweet. It was not my intention to trivialize the Holocaust nor to compare the President to Adolf Hitler. The mention of Hitler was meant to represent the face of evil that still exists in the world today.

Notice how different the whole thing would have sounded in a consistently active voice:

I need to first apologize to all those my tweet offended. I did not intend to trivialize the Holocaust nor to compare the President to Adolf Hitler. I meant the mention of Hitler to represent the face of evil that still exists in the world today.

This is not to say that we should reject as duplicitous every use of the passive voice. But when the context clearly calls for an active voice—say, in a public apology—we should be suspicious when someone drops out of a sentence entirely when they should be the subject of it.

If you disagree with this section, just remember that it was written with the best intentions.

## 7. Language Revision

Languages aren’t artificial products constructed by “linguistic experts” in some laboratory or think tank. They are living, changing products of human intelligence designed to perform various functions, including not just communicating ideas from one person to another, but also issuing commands, asking questions, and certifying relationships (as in wedding ceremonies). This being the case, languages tend to mirror the foibles, aspirations, loyalties, and (alas!) prejudices of those who speak them. English is no exception. Like all languages, English undergoes revision on a regular basis.

### THE REFORM OF SEXIST LANGUAGE

In the past 20 or 30 years, a minor revolution has taken place in the United States, as well as many other countries, in the attitudes of most people toward members of minority groups and women. Inevitably, this revolution has been mirrored in the linguistic practices of those caught up in it.

But the most extensive linguistic changes of this kind have been those reflecting the changing attitudes of most people concerning relationships between men and women and the roles played by women in society. A large majority of previously common sexist locutions have disappeared from everyday speech. This linguistic change has occurred very quickly, as these things go, no doubt in part because of the persistent demands of women’s rights advocates. But it also has happened quickly because of the swiftness with which attitudes toward women and their roles in society have changed, and because of the speed with which women have entered fields previously reserved primarily for men.

Not so long ago, when the overwhelming majority of those in high office were men, it may have made some sense to refer to these people as *businessmen* and *congressmen*. But in this day and age, with increasing numbers of women taking on these roles, it makes much less sense. In addition, there is a general realization that these sexist terms imply not just that those holding these offices always are male, but also, and wrongly, that only males are supposed to, or are competent to, fill them. The old sexist language implies in subtle but persuasive ways that positions of power should be *manned*, not *personed* or *womaned*, and this in turn implies that only men are capable of holding



these important positions. Thus, substituting nonsexist words for the old sexist terms puts women on an equal linguistic footing with men that not only reflects their growing equality but also helps make it possible. Our thoughts about the world—how it works and how it should work—always are framed in language; sexist locutions tend to introduce sexist thoughts into our minds.

So today, people who head committees or departments are generally called *chairs*, not *chairmen* (“I would like to address the chair about . . .” or “The chair has ruled that . . .”). Similarly, people who deliver the mail tend to get called *letter carriers*, not *mailmen*. We say *firefighter* instead of *fireman* and *police officer* rather than *policeman*. The term *man* and its many derivatives now often are replaced by *people*, *person*, and the like. Publishers don’t cotton to manuscripts that contain locutions like “Of course, a *man* might be described as taking a . . .” when it would be more accurate to say “*Someone* might be described as taking a . . .” or to phrases like “even if *he* is willing to allow . . .” when what is meant is *he or she*.<sup>14</sup>

One of the more interesting language changes accompanying the feminist revolution has been the widespread use of the term *Ms.*, intended to serve when the marriage status of a woman is not considered relevant. The point of this change was to foster equal treatment of the sexes. Men, whether married or single, have always been referred to by the same term, *Mr.*, whereas women have had to be called either *Miss* or *Mrs.*, depending on their marital status. In magazine and newspaper articles, the trend is to drop the title entirely and simply refer to women by their last names—the way men always have been. A similar, and perhaps much more significant change, is the fact that women nowadays don’t always take on the last name of their mate, although, interestingly, they still usually do (while men rarely do). But even when women do adopt their husband’s last name, they often also hang onto their own, so that, for example, we refer to Hillary Rodham Clinton, not just Hillary Clinton.<sup>15</sup>

But an even more important language change may be the elimination of locutions like this one, once typical of the language encountered in all sorts of places, including public school history textbooks: “Pioneers moved west, taking their wives and children with them.” That made all of the pioneers into men, while women and children were just accessories. A text written today would get it right and say something like “Pioneer families moved west.”

On the other hand, things can get carried too far. It would be unnecessary, wouldn’t it, for Germans to stop referring to their homeland as the *Fatherland*, or Englishmen—that is, citizens of England—to their *mother tongue*? What purpose would be served by replacing *Uncle Sam* with *Aunt Sarah*? And why worry about using the term *manhole* when talking about those round excisions in streets and avenues, as did the Public Works Departments of several American cities? (Would it be wrong to change biblical references to God from the *He* employed in the original versions to some more neutral

<sup>14</sup>Both of these examples are taken, alas, from a journal article coauthored back in the bad old days by a male coauthor of this text.

<sup>15</sup>However, the increasingly common practice of adding a name by hyphenation (and passing both on to children) is not sustainable. What happens if everyone does it? Well, then in the next generation, two people with hyphenated last names will have kids, and those kids will have four names. Their kids will have eight and in just eight generations we’ll all have 256 last names. Filling out forms is onerous enough as it is. One suspects that another convention must be around the corner.

term?) The term *humankind* seems an apt substitute for *mankind*, but somehow the “era of ordinary people” doesn’t have the same ring as the “century of the common man.”

In any case, the changes in linguistic style brought on by the feminist revolution have also raised questions of aesthetic taste—of what sounds right or wrong rolling off the tongue or when reading a book. The expression *her or his*, to take one example, rings false, perhaps because it calls attention to the avoidance of *his* (used to mean *his* or *her*) or of *his or her*, and thus detracts from what is being said. Good taste sometimes dictates other sorts of moves, for instance, employing plural rather than singular pronouns, thus saying things like, “when students read their textbooks . . .” rather than “when a student reads his textbook . . .” (That’s one reason for the plethora of plural expressions that occur in this textbook. Note, by the way, that the term *congressperson* nowhere appears on these pages, although *member of Congress* is used quite often.)

Interestingly, no one seems overwrought by the fact that Liberty always is portrayed as a woman. (Think, for instance, of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.) Note also that, although there are lots of complaints about sexist terms like *waitress* and *actress*, no one seems bothered by the equally sexist term *widower*. Women still receive an award each year for best *actress*. And freshmen still are called *freshmen*. Ah, well.

## PC (POLITICALLY CORRECT) TERMINOLOGY

The revolution concerning gender rhetoric is part of a larger movement that also has dramatically changed the ways in which we speak of minorities. As attitudes have changed, language, inevitably, has followed suit.

The result is that certain locutions have become “in,” while others are “out.” Some are politically correct (PC), some politically incorrect. Careers have been wrecked by publicly using expressions like “fat Jap” and “Nigra.” It would be political suicide today to say publicly, as someone did in the 1970s, when then Governor Tribbitt (Delaware) hired a woman as his press secretary at \$20,000 a year, “If he wants to pay \$10,000 a mammary, that’s his business.” We aren’t supposed to use phrases like *admitted homosexual* (because it implies that being a homosexual is bad) or *tidal wave of immigrants* (because of its negative implication concerning immigrants).

On the whole, of course, changes of this nature are all to the good and are applauded by just about everybody. But problems do arise, and it is quite possible that an excess of zeal causes some of them. At Stanford University, students can be punished for violating speech codes designed to suppress racist, sexist, and homophobic speech that carries no legal penalty in the “real” world. An administrator at the University of California, Santa Cruz, was even wary of phrases like a “nip in the air” and “a chink in one’s armor” because certain of these words could be construed as racial slurs in other contexts.

Sometimes the attempt to be PC defies all logic. The reading passages of the New York State Regents English exam were edited to delete anything that might make “any student feel ill at ease when taking the test.” For example, all references to Judaism were cut from an excerpt from a work by Isaac Bashevis Singer about Jewish life in Europe! In one revision, for instance, “most Jewish women” was changed to “most women.” For this PC passage, the New York State Regents were given the NCTE Doublespeak award for 2002.

And sometimes these kinds of sweeping changes can produce truly bizarre results. In one infamous episode, the American Family Association decided to set up a program that would automatically change the word “gay” to the word “homosexual” in wire





"We're trying to come up with a less offensive term for 'political correctness.'"

Alex Gregory The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

service stories before publication on its news website OneNewsNow. That seemed to work out for them and their audience until American sprinter Tyson Gay started to make headlines prior to the 2008 Olympics. At that point—well, you can guess what happened: "Tyson Homosexual was a blur in blue, sprinting 100 meters faster than anyone ever has . . . Homosexual qualified for his first Summer Games team and served notice he's certainly someone to watch in Beijing . . . 'It means a lot to me,' the 25-year-old Homosexual said. 'I'm glad my body could do it, because now I know I have it in me.'"

Are we getting a bit overzealous in our, shall we say, *linguistic cleansing*? It no doubt is a good idea, now that the children of unwed parents are not looked down upon, to stop referring to them as *bastards*, thus getting rid of the unfair opprobrium of that nasty term. And why not change the name of the Italian Welfare Agency to the *Italian-American Community Service Agency*?

But is there anything wrong with calling "mixed-breed" dogs *mongrels*, "visually impaired" people *blind*, or the "psychologically impacted" *insane*? Don't those who call the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue *pornographic* rob that word of its legitimate meaning? (Is there a risk here that the door will be opened to wrongheaded legislation?) Was Newt Gingrich just being polite when he said President Bill Clinton was "factually challenged" instead of calling him a liar? (Was he just trying to be cute, snide, or clever?)

Although quibbling about the trivial use of PC language continues, the more serious issue of political correctness toward certain minority groups may be eroding. Now that immigration has once again heated up in the wake of the Great Recession, and multiculturalism has come under attack with the rise in Islamophobia after 9/11, PC has been winding down. In the debate over whether to change the Constitution to deny citizenship to children born in this country of immigrant parents, terms like *anchor babies* are now widely used as slurs—this one implying that illegal immigrants have babies here to improve the parents' chance of getting citizenship. No PC is evident there. The same

## What Is in a Name?

Sometimes it takes a bit of consideration to determine how to distinguish the genuinely offensive from the object of PC overreaction. Current controversies over Native American sports team names provide particularly interesting cases.

It seems like overkill to object to a team name like the Atlanta *Braves* (though the *Braves'* icons, mascots, and chants may be another story). If the *Braves* have an inappropriate name and the Golden State *Warriors* do not, and if the Kansas City *Chiefs'* name is problematic but not that of the Sacramento *Kings*, then it can only be because any such reference to Native American culture is offensive, and that is at least not obvious.

A slightly harder case may be the Cleveland *Indians*. At least one author of this text finds it a little uncomfortable to name a team after an entire people. Coupled with the problematic nature of "Indian" as a name for that people, and the fact that we're referring to a current culture, there seems to be a relevant difference between the Cleveland *Indians* and, say, the Minnesota *Vikings* or the USC *Trojans*.

One name that seems obviously offensive is the Washington *Redskins*. Indeed, a growing number of sportswriters and commentators have begun to refuse to use the name, instead referring to the team just by their city.

What do you think? Where should an appropriate line be drawn? What exactly is the difference between "Redskins" and "Indians" or between "Indians" and "Braves"? Is there a relevant difference?

goes for widespread attacks on Muslims, who are increasingly targeted by well-funded anti-Islamic groups peddling hate and fear on websites and blogs. When slurs and hate speech filter into the national dialogue, PC collapses into prejudice and scapegoating—exactly what it was created to prevent.

## Summary of Chapter 7

1. Most words have emotive meanings (in addition to cognitive meanings). Words like *oppression*, *kike*, and *bitch* have more or less negative emotive overtones; words like *spring*, *free*, and *satisfaction* have positive emotive overtones; and words like *socialism*, *marijuana*, and *God* have mixed overtones.
2. Con artists use the emotive side of language (1) to mask cognitive meaning by whipping up emotions so that reason is overlooked and (2) to dull the force of language so as to make acceptable what otherwise might not be. The latter purpose often is accomplished by means of *euphemisms* (less offensive or duller expressions used in place of more offensive or emotively charged locutions).
3. Claims and arguments are often made unnecessarily unclear, and sometimes made to seem more plausible or cogent than they really are by virtue of ambiguity or vagueness within them. Ambiguities in statements may be semantic or syntactic. Ambiguity and vagueness are often unavoidable and sometimes even desired, but they should not be used to hide conceptual or logical faults.



4. Common rhetorical devices often are used in a slippery manner. **Examples:** *Slanting* words and expressions ("All this proves is that . . ."); *weasel words* that suck out all or part of the meaning of a sentence ("Economic success may be . . ."); *fine-print disclaimers* that take back part of what was originally asserted ("Tickets must be purchased 30 days in advance, subject to availability . . ."); *evasion* that, for example, may mask failure to respond to questions (Sarah Palin wandering from the point of the question about whether she had the national security credentials to serve as vice president). Note that employing the right tone can be used to mask lack of cogent reasoning or content or to sway audiences via emotional appeals.
5. People often use a number of subtleties of language to help them manipulate claims and arguments. Confusing use and mention, chicanery with quotations, and relying on the passive voice are three common problems.
6. The meanings of words and expressions sometimes are changed so as either to get around or to take advantage of laws, rules, or customs. **Example:** Calling an employee a *subcontractor* to avoid paying a minimum wage or Social Security taxes. But it isn't always easy to determine whether terms have been used rightly or wrongly. **Example:** Psychologists disagree about whether it makes good sense to use the expression *mental illness*, because they disagree about whether the implied analogy to physical illness is useful or accurate. Loaded language can "frame" issues and thus influence the way we think about public policy. **Example:** Calling tax cuts "tax relief" or estate tax "death tax."
7. The social revolution that changed the roles played by women in society, as well as the attitudes of most Americans concerning male-female relationships, has resulted in matching linguistic changes. **Examples:** Replacing expressions in which the term *man* is used to refer to people in general by more neutral words such as *person*; using *Ms.* in some cases instead of *Miss* or *Mrs.*; not repeatedly using *his* to mean *his* or *her*; or switching to the plural form to avoid this use of *his*. (Note that when use of dechauvinized language may ring a bit false—*her* or *his* can sound somewhat forced—there always are aesthetically acceptable ways to avoid sexist locutions.) But do we go a bit too far when we start talking, say, about *personhole* covers?
8. The linguistic revolution that has replaced sexist language with locutions that are more congenial with today's attitudes and beliefs also has changed many of the ways in which we refer to members of minorities and other groups, as well as to activities in several important areas of life. Using current lingo, we can say that some ways of speaking are *politically correct* (PC), others not. **Examples:** The terms *Native American*, *physically challenged*, and *Latino* are "in"; *Indian*, *crippled* (or *handicapped*), and *Hispanic* (used to refer, say, to Mexican Americans) are "out." In some cases, the PC revolution may have gone a bit too far. But some PC language is eroding for the wrong reasons now that immigrants are coming under attack and Islamophobia is on the rise.

### EXERCISE SET 7-1

In the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama gave a speech, "A More Perfect Union," hailed by many people as one of the most important speeches on race and the American experience since those given by Martin Luther King. Evaluate this excerpt and explain why it might be effective, persuasive rhetoric. Consider the language (positive and negative), tone, examples, repetitions of words and phrases, choice of pronouns, and anything else you can think of. Conclude with a discussion of the worldview it reflects.

[W]e have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the O.J. trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. . . . We can pounce on some gaffe by Hillary Clinton as evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. . . . And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment in the election, we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn: that these kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the emergency room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care, who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race. . . . This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit. . . .

I would not be running for president if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for the country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.



## EXERCISE SET 7-2

- ✓1. Louisiana license plates feature the motto "Sportsman's Paradise." Is this sexist? Defend your answer.
2. Over the past decade, the term *illegal alien* has been euphemized as "undocumented worker" or even "guest without status." What is the point of these euphemisms, and who would be most likely to use them?
- \*3. Translate the following statement, found on the back of a Hallmark greeting card, into everyday lingo:<sup>16</sup>

*Printed on recycled paper. Contains a minimum of 10% post-consumer and 40% pre-consumer material.*

Aside from the euphemistic use of language in this statement, is there something a bit sneaky going on here?

- ✓4. Here is a passage from a thankfully out-of-print edition of the U.S. history textbook *America: Its People and Values*:

*A friendly Indian named Squanto helped the colonists. He showed them how to plant corn and how to live in the wilderness. A soldier, Captain Miles Standish, taught the Pilgrims how to defend themselves against unfriendly Indians.*

How is language used to slant this account? In what other ways is it slanted? Rewrite the passage from the point of view of the "unfriendly Indians" (that is, Native Americans) in question.

5. Explain in plain English Annette Koloday's "reconceptualization" of the term *family* in this quote from her book *Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century* (this passage was nominated for the Doublespeak Award, *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*, January 2002):

*To conceptualize what I am calling the "family-friendly campus" means reconceptualizing what we include in the term family. The family in the twenty-first century will no longer be identified by blood ties, by legalized affiliations, by cohabitation, or by heterosexual arrangements.*

How, then, would you define family?

- \*6. Translate into plain English the following remark by Admiral Isaac C. Kidd when he was chief of navy matériel:

*We have gone with teams of competent contract people from Washington to outlying field activities to look over their books with them . . . to see in what areas there is susceptibility to improved capability to commit funds.*

- ✓7. An animal rights organization wants to replace the term *pet owner* in San Francisco laws with the expression *pet guardian*, because the term *owner* implies that animals are property. Defend or challenge their view on this.

<sup>16</sup>Starred (\*) items are answered in a section at the back of the book.

8. Several groups opposed to legal abortions, as well as a few state legislatures in recently enacted laws, refer to a fetus as an *intact child*, a *partially born infant*, or an *unborn child* (see, for example, the March–April 2000 edition of *Extra!*).
  - a. What is the point of their use of these locutions instead of the medical term *fetus*?
  - b. To which sections or topics of this chapter is this example relevant?

## EXERCISE SET 7-3

For each of the following statements, say whether it contains semantic ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, or vagueness. Is this ambiguity or vagueness detrimental to understanding and/or evaluating the claim? Briefly explain your answer.

1. From HillaryClinton.com: "Hillary Clinton will be a small business president."
2. Headline from MLB.com: "Bryant sustains mild ankle sprain on bases."
- ✓3. From KansasCity.com: "Prince's genius was underrated, yet he still stood out among giants."
- \*4. Overheard on subway: "I wish I could be a professional basketball player, just like my boyfriend."
5. Headline from the *New York Daily News*: "NCAA Bans Trojans from Bowls."

## EXERCISE SET 7-4

- ✓1. Find at least one good example of an inappropriate name (for example, *subcontractor*) that is applied so that the law, a custom, or whatever deals with them differently, and explain the chicanery. (No, you aren't supposed to "find" the example in this textbook.)
2. Check your local newspaper, magazines, television programs, the Internet, or some such; find at least two examples of doublespeak or jargon, and translate them back into plain English.
3. Do the same with a particularly obtuse use (as opposed to a "mention") of academese from one of your textbooks (*definitely* not from this one!).
4. Do the same with respect to sexist locutions, but this time translate into PC language.

## EXERCISE SET 7-5

- \*1. Each chapter in this text starts out with a few (hopefully) apt quotes. But doesn't one of the quotes that starts this language chapter use one of the devices railed against in this chapter? Which one might this be? If it doesn't, why doesn't it?